The Magnificent Ambersons

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

CHAPTER XX—Continued.
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And if space itself can be haunted, as memory is haunted, then some time, when the space that was Isabel's room came to be made into the small bedrooms and "kitchenettes" already designed as its destiny, that space might well be haunted and the new occupants come to feel that some seemingly causeless depression hung about it—a wraith of the passion that filled it throughout the last night that George Minafer spent there.

Whatever remnants of the old high-handed arrogance were still within him, he did penance for his deepest sin that night—and it may be that to this day some impressionable, overworked woman in a "kitchenette," after turning out the light, will seem to see a young man kneeling in the darkness, shaking convulsively, and, with arms outstretched through the wall, clutching at the covers of a shadowy bed. It may seem to her that she hears the faint cry, over and over:

"Mother, forgive me! God, forgive me!"

CHAPTER XXI.

At least it may be claimed for George that his last night in the house where he had been born was not occupied with his own disheartening fu-

He Did Penance for His Deepest Sin That Night.

ture, but with sorrow for what sacrifices his pride and youth had demanded of others. And early in the morning he came downstairs and tried to help Fanny make coffee on the kitchen range.

"There was something I wanted to say to you last night, Aunt Fanny," he said.

"Why—why—" she stammered; but she knew what he was going to say, and that was why she had been more and more nervous. "Hadn't—perhaps—perhaps we'd better get the—the things moved to the little new home first, George. Let's—"

He interrupted quietly, though at her phrase, "the little new home," his pungent impulse was to utter one loud shout and run. "It was about this new place that I wanted to speak. I've been thinking it over and I've decided. I want you to take all the things from mother's room and use them and keep them for me, and I'm sure the little apartment will be just what you like; and with the extra bedroom probably you could find some woman friend to come and live there and share the expense with you. But I've decided on another arrangement for myself, and so I'm not going with you. I don't suppose you'll mind much, and I don't see why you should mind—particularly, that is. I can't imagine you, or anyone else, being much attached to me, so—"

He stopped in amazement: no chair had been left in the kitchen, but Fanny gave a despairing glance around her in search of one, then sank abruptly and sat flat upon the floor.

"What on earth—" George sprang to her. "Get up, Aunt Fanny!"

"I can't. I'm too weak. Let me alone, George!" And as he released the wrist he had seized to help her she uttered the dismal prophecy which for days she had been matching against her hopes: "You're going to leave me—in the lurch!"

"Why no, Aunt Fanny!" he protested. "At first I'd have been something of a burden on you. I'm to get eight dollars a week; about thirty-two a month. The rent's thirty-six dollars a month, and the table d'hote dinner runs up to over twenty-two dollars apiece, so with my half of the rent—eighteen dollars—I'd have less than nothing left out of my salary to pay my share of the groceries for all the breakfasts and luncheons. You see you'd not only be doing all the housework and cooking, but you'd be paying more of the expenses than I would."

She stared at him with such a forlorn blankness as he had never seen. "I'd be paying—" she said feebly. "I'd be paying—"

"Certainly you would. You'd be using more of your money than—"

"My money!" Fanny's chin drooped upon her thin chest and she laughed miserably. "I've got twenty-eight dollars. That's all."

"You mean until the interest is due again?"

"I mean that's all," Fanny said. "I mean that's all there is. There won't be any more interest because there isn't any principal."

"Why you told—"

She shook her head. "No. I haven't told you anything."

"Then it was Uncle George. He told me you had enough to fall back on. That's just what he said: 'to fall back on.' He said you'd lost more than you should in the headlight company, but he'd insisted that you should hold out enough to live on, and you'd very wisely followed his advice."

"I know," she said weakly. "I told him so. He didn't know, or else he'd forgotten how much Wilbur's insurance amounted to, and I—oh, it seemed such a sure way to make a real fortune out of a little—and I thought I could do something for you, George, if you ever came to need it—and it all looked so bright I just thought I'd put it all in. I did—every cent except my last interest payment—and it's gone."

"Good Lord!" George began to pace up and down the worn planks of the bare floor. "Why on earth did you wait till now to tell such a thing as this?"

"I couldn't till I had to," she said piteously. It wouldn't do any good—not any good on earth." She got out her lace handkerchief and began to cry. "Nothing does any good, I guess, in this old world! Oh, how tired of this old world I am! I didn't know what to do. I just tried to go ahead and be as practical as I could, and arrange some way for us to live. Oh, I knew you didn't want me, George! I can see that much! You don't suppose I want to thrust myself on you, do you? It isn't very pleasant to be thrusting yourself on a person you know doesn't want you—but I knew you oughtn't to be left all alone in the world; it isn't good. I knew your mother'd want me to watch over you and try to have something like a home for you—I knew she'd want me to do what I tried to do!" Fanny's tears were bitter now, and her voice, hoarse and wet, was tragically sincere. "Oh! and now—you don't want—you want—you want to leave me in the lurch! You—"

"Oh, my Lord!" He went to her and lifted her. "For God's sake get up! Come, let's take the coffee into the other room and see what's to be done."

He got her to her feet; she leaned upon him, already somewhat comforted, and, with his arm about her, he conducted her to the dining room and seated her in one of the two kitchen chairs which had been placed at the rough table. "There!" he said, "get over it!" Fanny's spirits revived appreciably: she looked up with a plaintive eagerness. "I had bought all my fall clothes, George," she said; "and I paid every bill I owed. I don't owe a cent for clothes, George."

"That's good," he said wanly, and he had a moment of physical dizziness that decided him to sit down quickly. For an instant it seemed to him that he was not Fanny's nephew, but married to her. He passed his pale hand over his paler forehead. "Well, let's see where we stand," he said feebly. "Let's see if we can afford this place you've selected."

Fanny continued to brighten. "I'm sure it's the most practical plan we could possibly have worked out, George—and it is a comfort to be among nice people. I think we'll both enjoy it, because the truth is we've been keeping too much to ourselves for a long while. It isn't good for people."

"I was thinking about the money, Aunt Fanny. The rent is thirty-six dollars a month; the dinner is twenty-two and a half for each of us, and we've got to have some provision for other food. We won't need any clothes for a year, perhaps—"

"Oh, longer!" she exclaimed. "So you see—"

"I see that forty-five and thirty-six make eighty-one," he said. "At the lowest, we need a hundred dollars a month—and I'm going to make thirty-two."

"I thought of that, George," she said confidently, "and I'm sure it will be all right. You'll be earning a great deal more than that very soon."

"I don't see any prospect of it—not till I'm admitted to the bar, and that will be two years at the earliest."

"Well, there's the six hundred dollars from the sale. Six hundred and twelve dollars it was."

"It isn't six hundred and twelve now," said George. "It's about one hundred and sixty."

Fanny showed a momentary dismay. "Why, how—"

"I lent Uncle George two hundred; I gave fifty apiece to old Sam and those two other old darkies that worked for grandfather so long, and ten to each of the servants here—"

"And you gave me thirty-six," she said thoughtfully, "for the first month's rent, in advance."

"Did I? I'd forgotten. Well, with about a hundred and sixty in bank and our expenses a hundred a month, it doesn't seem as if this new place—"

"Still," she interrupted, "we have paid the first month's rent in advance, and it does seem to be the most practical—"

George rose. "See here, Aunt Fanny," he said decisively. "You stay here and look after the moving. Old Frank doesn't expect me until afternoon, this first day, but I'll go and see him now."

. . . It was early, and old Frank, just established at his big, flat-topped desk, was surprised when his prospective assistant and pupil walked in. He was pleased, as well as surprised, however, and rose, offering a cordial old hand. "The real flare!" he said. "The real flare for the law. That's right! Couldn't wait till afternoon to begin! I'm delighted that you—"

"I wanted to say—" George began, but his patron cut him off.

"Wait just a minute, my boy. I've prepared a little speech of welcome, and even though you're five hours ahead of time, I mean to deliver it. First of all, your grandfather was my old war comrade and my best client; for years I prospered through my connection with his business, and his grandson is welcome in my office and to my best efforts in his behalf. But I want to confess, Georgie, that during your earlier youth I may have had some slight feeling of—well, prejudice, not altogether in your favor; but whatever slight feeling it was, it began to vanish on that afternoon, a good while ago, when you stood up to your Aunt Amelia Amberson as you did in the Major's library, and talked to her as a man and a gentleman should. I saw then what good stuff was in you—and I always wanted to mention it. I think you'll find an honest pleasure now in industry and frugality that wouldn't have come to you in a more frivolous career. The law is a jealous mistress and a stern mistress, but a—"

George had stood before him in great and increasing embarrassment; and he was unable to allow the address to proceed to its conclusion.

"I can't do it!" he burst out. "I can't take her for my mistress."

"What?"

"I've come to tell you, I've got to find something that's quicker. I can't—"

Old Frank got a little red. "Let's sit down," he said. "What's the trouble?"

George told him.

The old gentleman listened sympathetically, only murmuring: "Well, well!" from time to time, and nodding acquiescence.

"You see she's set her mind on this apartment," George explained. "She's got some old cronies there, and I guess she's been looking forward to the games of bridge and the kind of harmless gossip that goes on in such places. Really, it's a life she'd like better than anything else—better than that she's lived at home, I really believe. It struck me she's just about got to have it, and after all she could hardly have anything less."

"This comes pretty heavily upon me, you know," said old Frank. "I got her into that headlight company, and she fooled me about her resources as much as she did your Uncle George. I was never your father's adviser, if you remember, and when the insurance was turned over to her some other lawyer arranged it—probably your father's. But it comes pretty heavily on me, and I feel a certain responsibility."

"Not at all. I'm taking the responsibility." And George smiled with one corner of his mouth. "I'll tell you how it is, sir." He flushed, and, looking out of the streaked and smoky window beside which he was sitting, spoke with difficulty. "I feel as if—as if perhaps I had one or two pretty important things in my life to make up for. Well, I can't. I can't make them up to—to whom I would. It's struck me that, as I couldn't, I might be a little decent to somebody else, perhaps—if I could manage it! I never have been particularly decent to poor old Aunt Fanny."

"Oh, I don't know: I shouldn't say that. A little youthful teasing—I doubt if she's minded so much. It seems to me she's had a fairly comfortable life—up to now—if she was disposed to take it that way."

"But 'up to now' is the important thing," George said. "Now is now—and you see I can't wait two years to be admitted to the bar and begin to practice. I've got to start in at something else that pays from the start, and that's what I've come to you about. I have an idea, you see."

"Well, I'm glad of that!" said old Frank, smiling. "I can't think of anything just at this minute that pays from the start."

"I only know of one thing, myself."

"What is it?"

George flushed again, but managed to laugh at his own embarrassment. "I suppose I'm about as ignorant of business as anybody in the world," he said. "But I've heard they pay very high wages to people in dangerous trades; I've always heard they did, and I'm sure it must be true. I mean people that handle touchy chemicals or high explosives—men in dynamite factories, or who take things of that sort about the country in wagons, and shoot oil wells. I thought I'd see if you couldn't tell me something more about it, or else introduce me to some one who could, and then I thought I'd see if I couldn't get something of the kind to do as soon as possible. I wanted to get started today if I could."

Old Frank gave him a long stare. At first this scrutiny was sharply incredulous; then it was grave; finally it developed into a threat of overwhelming laughter; a forked vein in his forehead became more visible and his eyes seemed about to protrude.

But he controlled his impulse; and, rising, took up his hat and overcoat. "All right," he said. "If you'll promise not to get blown up, I'll go with you to see if we can find the job." Then, meaning what he said, but amazed that he did mean it, he added: "You certainly are the most practical young man I ever met!"

CHAPTER XXII.

They found the job. It needed an apprenticeship of only six weeks, during which period George was to receive fifteen dollars a week; after that he would get twenty-eight. This settled the apartment question, and Fanny was presently established in a greater contentment than she had known for a long time.

On Sunday mornings Fanny went to church and George took long walks. He explored the new city, and found it hideous, especially in the early spring, before the leaves of the shade trees were out.

One of his Sunday walks, that spring, he made into a sour pilgrimage. It was a misty morning of belated snow slush, and suited him to a perfection of miserableness, as he stood before the great dripping department store which now occupied the big plot of ground where once had stood both the Amberson hotel and the Amberson opera house. From there he drifted to the old "Amberson block," but this was only a shadow. The old structure had not been replaced, but a cavernous entryway for trucks had been torn in its front, and upon the cornice, where the old separate metal letters had spelt "Amberson block," there was a long bill board sign: "Doogan Storage."

To spare himself, he went out National avenue and saw the piles of slush-covered wreckage where the Mansion and his mother's house had been, and where the Major's ill-fated five "new" houses had stood; for these were down, too, to make room for the great tenement already shaped in unending lines of foundation.

He turned away from the devastated site, thinking bitterly that the only Amberson mark still left upon the town was the name of the boulevard—Amberson boulevard. But he had reckoned without the city council of the new order, and by an unpleasant coincidence, while the thought was still in his mind, his eyes fell upon a metal oblong sign upon the lamp-post at the corner. There were two of these little signs upon the lamp-post, at an obtuse angle to each other, one to give passersby the name of National avenue, the other to acquaint them with Amberson boulevard. But the one upon which should have been stenciled "Amberson boulevard" exhibited the words "Tenth street."

George stared at it hard. Then he walked quickly along the boulevard to the next corner and looked at the little sign there. "Tenth street."

It had begun to rain, but George stood unheeding, staring at the little

"D—— Them!"

sign. "D— them!" he said finally, and, turning up his coat collar, plodded back through the soggy streets toward "home."

The utilitarian impudence of the city authorities put a thought into his mind. A week earlier he had happened to stroll into the large parlor of the apartment house, finding it empty, and on the centertable he noticed a large, red-bound, gilt-edged book, newly printed, bearing the title: "A Civic History," and beneath the title, the rubric, "Biographies of the 500 Most Prominent Citizens and Families in the History of the City." He had glanced at it absently, merely noticing the title and subtitle, and wandered out of the room, thinking of other things and feeling no curiosity about the book. But he had thought of it several times since with a faint, vague uneasiness; and now when he entered the lobby he walked directly into the parlor where he had seen the book. The room was empty, as it always was on Sunday mornings, and the flamboyant volume was still upon the table—evidently a fixture as a sort of local Almanach de Gotha, or Burke, for the enlightenment of tenants and boarders.

He turned to the index where the names of the five hundred Most Prominent Citizens and Families in the History of the City were arranged in alphabetical order, and ran his finger down the column of A's: Abbett, Abbott, Abrams, Adams, Adams, Adler, Akers, Albertsmeyer, Alexander, Allen, Ambrose, Ambuhl, Anderson, Andrews, Appenbasch, Archer, Arszman, Ashcraft, Austin, Avey.

George's eyes remained for some time fixed on the thin space between the names "Allen" and "Ambrose." Then he closed the book quietly, and went up to his own room, agreeing with the elevator boy, on the way, that it was getting to be a mighty nasty wet and windy day outside.

The elevator boy noticed nothing unusual about him and neither did Fanny, when she came in from church with her hat ruined, an hour later. And yet something had happened—a thing which, years ago, had been the eagerest hope of many, many good citizens of the town. They had thought of it, longed for it, hoping acutely that they might live to see the day when it would come to pass. And now it had happened at last: Georgie Minafer had got his come-upance.

He had got it three times filled and running over. The city had rolled over his heart, burying it under, as it rolled over the Major's and buried it under. The city had rolled over the Ambersons and buried them under to the last vestige; and it mattered little that George guessed easily enough that most of the five hundred Most Prominent had paid something substantial "to defray the cost of steel engraving, etc."—the Five Hundred had heaved the final shovelful of soot upon that heap of obscurity wherein the Ambersons were lost forever from sight and history. "Quicksilver in a nest of cracks!"

Georgie Minafer had got his come-upance, but the people who had so longed for it were not there to see it, and they never knew it. Those who were still living had forgotten all about it and all about him.

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George had seen Eugene only once since their calamitous encounter. They had passed on opposite sides of the street, downtown; each had been aware that the other was aware of him, and yet each kept his eyes straight forward, and neither had shown a perceptible alteration of countenance. It seemed to George that he felt emanating from the outwardly imperturbable person of his mother's old friend a hate that was like a hot wind.

At his mother's funeral and at the Major's he had been conscious that Eugene was there: though he had afterward no recollection of seeing him, and, while certain of his presence, was uncertain how he knew of it. Fanny had not told him, for she understood George well enough not to speak to him of Eugene or Lucy. Nowadays Fanny almost never saw either of them and seldom thought of them—so sly is the way of time with life. She was passing middle age, when old intensities and longings grow thin and flatten out, as Fanny herself was thinning and flattening out; and she was settling down contentedly to her apartment-house intimacies.

The city was so big, now, that people disappeared into it unnoticed, and the disappearance of Fanny and her nephew was not exceptional. People no longer knew their neighbors as a matter of course; one lived for years next door to strangers—that sharpest of all the changes since the old days—and a friend would lose sight of a friend for a year, and not know it.

One May day George thought he had a glimpse of Lucy. He was not certain, but he was sufficiently disturbed, in spite of his uncertainty. A promotion in his work now frequently took him out of town for a week, or longer, and it was upon his return from one of these absences that he had the strange experience. He had walked home from the station, and as he turned the corner which brought him in sight of the apartment house entrance, though two blocks distant from it, he saw a charming little figure come out, get into a shiny landaulet automobile, and drive away. Even at that distance no one could have any doubt that the little figure was charming; and the height, the quickness and decision of motion, even the swift gesture of a white glove toward the chauffeur—all were characteristic of Lucy. George was instantly subjected to a shock of indefinable nature, yet definitely a shock: he did not know what he felt—but he knew that he felt. He went on slowly, his knees shaky.

But he found Fanny not at home; she had been out all afternoon; and there was no record of any caller—and he began to wonder, then to doubt if the small lady he had seen in the distance was Lucy. It might as well have been, he said to himself—since anyone who looked like her could give him "a jolt like that!"

Lucy had not left a card. She never left one when she called on Fanny; though she did not give her reasons a quite definite form in her own mind. She came seldom; this was but the third time that year, and, when she did come, George was not mentioned, either by her hostess or by herself—an oddity contrived between the two ladies without either of them realizing how odd it was.

At other times Lucy's thoughts of George were anything but continuous, and weeks went by when he was not consciously in her mind at all. Her life was a busy one: she had the big house "to keep up;" she had a garden to keep up, too, a large and beautiful garden; she represented her father as a director for half a dozen public charity organizations, and did private charity work of her own, being a proxy mother of several large families; and she had "danced down," as she said, groups from eight or nine classes of new graduates returned from the universities, without marrying any of them, but she still danced—and still did not marry.

Her father, observing this circumstance happily, yet with some hypocritical concern, spoke of it to her one day as they stood in her garden. "I suppose I'd want to shoot him," he said, with attempted lightness. "But I mustn't be an old pig. I'd build you a beautiful house close by—just over yonder."

"No, no! That would be like—" she began impulsively; then checked herself. George Amberson's comparison of the Georgian house to the Amberson mansion had come into her mind, and she thought that another new house, built close by for her, would be like the house the Major built for Isabel.

"Like what?"

"Nothing." She looked serious, and when he reverted to his idea of "some day" grudgingly surrendering her up to a suitor, she invented a legend. "Did you ever hear the Indian name for that little grove of beech trees on the other side of the house?" she asked him.

"No—and you never did either!" he laughed.

"Don't be so sure! I read a great deal more than I used to—getting ready for my bookish days when I'll have to do something solid in the evenings and won't be asked to dance any more, even by the very youngest boys who think it's a sporting event to dance with the oldest of the 'older girls.' The name of the grove was 'Loma-Nashah' and it means 'They-Couldn't-Help-It.'"

"Doesn't sound like it."

"Indian names don't. There was a bad Indian chief lived in the grove before the white settlers came. He was the worst Indian that ever lived, and his name was—it was 'Vendonah.' That means 'Rides-Down-Everything.'"

"I see," said Eugene thoughtfully. He gave her a quick look and then fixed his eyes upon the end of the garden path. "Go on."

"Vendonah was an unspeakable case," Lucy continued. "He was so proud that he wore iron shoes, and he walked over people's faces with them. He was always killing people that way, and so at last the tribe decided that it wasn't a good enough excuse for him that he was young and inexperienced—he'd have to go. They took him down to the river, and put him in a canoe, and pushed him out from shore; and then they ran along the bank and wouldn't let him land, until at last the current carried the canoe out into the middle, and then on down to the ocean, and he never got back. They didn't want him back, of course, and if he'd been able to manage it, they'd have put him in another canoe and shoved him out into the river again. But still, they didn't elect another chief in his place. Other tribes thought that was curious, and wondered about it a lot, but finally they came to the conclusion that the beech grove people were afraid a new chief might turn out to be a bad Indian, too, and wear iron shoes like Vendonah. But they were wrong, because the real reason was that the tribe had led such an exciting life under Vendonah that they couldn't settle down to anything tamer. He was awful, but he always kept things happening—terrible things, of course. They hated him, but they weren't able to discover any other warrior that they wanted to make chief in his place. They couldn't help feeling that way."

"I see," said Eugene. "So that's why they named the place 'They-Couldn't-Help-It!'"

"It must have been."

"And so you're going to stay here in your garden," he said musingly. "You think it's better to keep on walking these sunshiny gravel paths between your flower beds, and growing to look like a pensive garden lady in a Victorian engraving."

"I suppose I'm like the tribe that lived here, papa. I had too much unpleasant excitement. It was unpleasant—but it was excitement. I don't want any more; in fact, I don't want anything but you."

"You don't?" He looked at her keenly, and she laughed and shook her head; but he seemed perplexed, rather doubtful. "What was the name of the grove?" he asked. "The Indian name, I mean."

"Mola-Haha."

"No, it wasn't; that wasn't the name, you said."

"I've forgotten."

"I see you have," he said, his look of perplexity remaining. "Perhaps you remember the chief's name better."

She shook her head again. "I don't!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Her Shoes Hurt Her Feet.

As a general thing, when you see a woman hobbling along the street with an agonized expression it is a sign that she's got more foot than head.—Dallas News.